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ABSTRACT

The New Way: Becoming Protestant Hmong in Contemporary Vietnam

Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm

This study investigates an ongoing massive conversion of Hmong people in Vietnam to Evangelical Protestantism - called *The New Way* (*Kev Cai Tshiab*) in Hmong vernacular. Based on intensive ethnographic fieldworks among the Hmong population in Northern Vietnam and among the Hmong Diaspora in the USA, this study examines the peculiar ways in which the evangelical message was transmitted by radio to Hmong communities. It shows that religious conversion, a profound transformation at both individual and community level, is possible by mass media broadcasts. Many Hmong were drawn to Christianity as a mean to improve their marginal position in Vietnamese society. Similarly, a sense of being marginal in the USA has attracted Hmong there to Christianity as a pathway to become modern Americans. This ambition is paradoxically combined with a nostalgic longing for a cultural homeland in Asia and has created a missionary zeal among many American Christian Hmong. Embarking on evangelical missions to the 'cultural homeland', American Hmong find themselves caught in this ambiguity.

For the Hmong converts in Vietnam a similar contradiction between tradition and conversion characterizes their new understandings of morality. A notion of sin, relating to practices of the past, has to be examined and dealt with. The problem for Christian converts is that they cannot simply abandon the past, since their sense of community and their status of a minority, both within their ethnic community and within the multi-ethnic Vietnam, continues to connect them to Hmong traditions. This problem is reinforced by the constant attacks on Hmong 'barbarism' by their Kinh neighbors who are the dominant majority-group in Vietnam. The

contradictions in this situation cause worries, confessions, and troubled soul-searching for many new Christian Hmong people in Vietnam today.